

Buddhist social work: Questioning the professionalism

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Josef Gohori: *During discussions between scholars, practitioners, and Buddhist monks at the expert meeting on Buddhist social work held in Hanoi back in 2018, some participants emphasized the importance of professionalism, dismissing volunteerism as an aspect related to charity. Prof. Hoi Loan, in your book, you have described the change from charity to Buddhist social work. Could you tell us more about the relationship between professionalism and Buddhist social work? Do you think there is something we may call professional knowledge or professional skills which Buddhist monks need to obtain in order to practice Buddhist social work? In other words, is there something which is clearly different from charity works or engaged Buddhism seen as charitable or volunteer actions?*

Prof. Hoi Loan Nguyen (Vietnam National University): I think that monks and Buddhists need to be equipped with professional social work knowledge and skills and social work practice methods so that they can gradually proceed with the transition from charity to social work. This is the only way we can avoid the situation when vulnerable people are dependent, relying on temples and other organizations. I believe professional skills will help monks to assist people to discover their internal strength, such as their active participation or active solving of their problems. Only in this way can we ensure sustainability and improve the effectiveness of the temples' assistance to people.



Thank you very much. That's a very important aspect. Many critics point out that the principle of giving, dána (Pali, Sans.: generosity, charity, alms giving, etc.) sometimes increases dependency without solving problem itself. Oyut-Erdene Namdaldagva from Mongolia is also one of the scholars who focuses on the professionalization in the Buddhist social work's context. Could you share your opinion with us?

Oyut-Erdene Namdaldagva (Mongolian National University of Education): There is a need for Buddhist social work to be recognized as social work professional practice. That's why I am



talking about professionalization. For example, in Mongolia, the public is not much aware of Buddhist social work activities. People regard the activities of monks and Buddhist organizations as a part of their spiritual or religious practice. Buddhist social work has a rich body of knowledge, skills and values. However, in order to practice Buddhist social work, Buddhist organizations and monks need on one hand, to establish an infrastructure of professional services, and on the other hand, to gain recognition of professional status.

I see. To be broadly recognized and valued in the society, to be a part of the welfare system, in your opinion, Buddhist social work should distinguish between charity (as a part of religious practice) and professional activity.

When we hear the word “professional,” we often imagine work, job, or license. Or someone who is hired and paid. However, as Shibata pointed out in 1986, the word “profession” has its origin in a Latin word “profiteri,” which means “to declare publicly.” The original meaning was that you have to profess that you are devoted for something, you have to declare that you will continue following your goal or mission. Shibata puts the word in contrast with “specialist,” saying that social workers should not only be just specialist.¹ Skills and knowledge are necessary to be a specialist, but do not guarantee that you are a professional. In this context, one might say that Buddhist monks are professionals declaring publicly their mission and devotion as followers of Buddha’s teaching, however, they may lack some skills and knowledge necessary to assist people in their lives. In other words, that they are not specialists.

What about Thailand? There is a long tradition and broadly shared practice and experience of so-called “development monks” in Thailand. “Development monks” have been supporting and assisting individuals, families, and communities in Thailand for many years. However, Venerable Surakrai, you have launched the education program on Buddhist social work at Mahamakut Buddhist University. Where is the difference between Buddhist social work and the tradition of “development monks”, which is often recognized as a part of charity or voluntary action? I believe this is related to our today’s debate on professionalism.

2 Shibata, S. (1986). Shakaifukushi shiso. In *Shakaifukushi genron*. Kyoto: Buddhist University Press. p. 77.



Ven. Surakrai Congboonwasana (Mahamakut Buddhist University, Thailand): If we mention the differences between these two words, we should understand first that the word “social work” in Thai is derived from the word “*Sangha*” in Pali language. It means to collect, to compile, to put together, to consolidate or to gather in the sense of social solidarity. It means consolidation of both mentality and material quality. Regarding mentality, it is the consolidation of the mind or consciousness whereas the consolidation of material quality means to have people gather, to solder together – not to split, not to leave someone behind but to live together peacefully.

No matter whether we call the monks who are involved in social welfare as doing “Buddhist social work” or being “development monks,” they both are the same in terms of social welfare. The monks never refer to themselves as “development monks” or doing “the Buddhist social work,” but they realize they are the monks who follow and act upon the Buddha’s teaching.

For the Bachelor of Social Work at Mahamakut Buddhist University, the term “Buddhist social work” is preferred because there are many meaningful aspects in the development of social work, and one of those is to make something better than the old situation, such as the improvement of the body, the mind, the society and the wisdom. This includes social work, which is to consolidate the mind, to solder people together, or to make the society remain as the only one – not separate. Therefore, the meaning of social work is not only to give people something, not to give them services, not to give them money but also to consolidate the society. Buddhist social work is the assistance for humankind, so that they can rely on themselves. This is relevant to both the Buddha’s teaching and principles of social work. We can apply them for the best results.

Thank you all! I believe our talk today helped us to see that the present debate on professionalism is multi-layered and, in many senses, reveals some commonalities between social work and Buddha’s teaching. Listening to you, I thought that distinguishing between professional and specialist-related aspects may help us to shape the Buddhist social work concept. We tend to focus on necessary skills, theories, and methods. However, the philosophy and principles which underpin the practice are important as well. The other issues are the fact that practice by Buddhist temples and monks is not recognized as social work, but rather as a part of social welfare or a social welfare system as Hoi Loan and Oyut-Erdene pointed out. This might be the other important "layer" of the professionalism debate. Thank you very much again and I look forward to our future debates.

Josef Gohori (Shukutoku University, Japan)

Did you find this interview interesting? Do you want to respond or share your opinion? Do you want to ask more questions? Please, feel free to contact us at asiainst@soc.shukutoku.ac.jp.